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A dowser swims with the dolphins

FABER — The Monroe Institute is a mountain place, very Blue Ridge. When you walk out the back door of the conference room and lift your eyes to the horizon, you feel a little like Heidi.

A very odd setting, in other words, to be talking about dolphins — especially when the presentation was being made by the president of the Charlottesville Dowsers.

But I happen to know a guy named Gary Smith, and that explains part of it. Gary has spent the last 16 years traveling around the country in his long-suffering van, operating sound equipment for various events, house-sitting for friends and asking lots of questions. He is perhaps the most inquisitive person I've ever met, as indicated by his ever-present button: "Just Say Know."

I did a column on Gary once, and ever since then he has given me a call whenever he comes home to Lynchburg to visit his mother. Invariably, he knows of some off-the-beaten-path events that I might find intriguing.

This one stumped me, though. Dowsing, I'd always thought, was something done with forked sticks to find water in the desert. Dolphins were highly intelligent marine mammals, as well as an NFL football team quarterbacked by Dan Marino. I could think of no logical connection between any of these things.

The connection, it turned out, was Shirley Bliley. A staff member at the Monroe Institute (founded in Nelson County by the late Robert Monroe and specializing in brain-wave research), Bliley both dowses and "dolphins." Both of those things, she believes, have to do with a state of mind.

"There's definitely something going on," she said. "Dolphins are everywhere these days."

Not literally, of course (the Tye River remains dolphin-free) but in the public consciousness. A table at the front of the vast conference room last Saturday was covered with books about dolphins, tapes about dolphins and CD's about dolphins.

As for Shirley Bliley, she heard so much about people who were transported into an "alpha state" by swimming with dolphins that she made arrangements with Donna Brewer — co-founder of Dolphin Discovery in Cancun, Mexico — to try it herself.

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Having said that, she and fellow Monroe Institute resident Faye Atwater showed us a series of videos that they had brought back from separate trips to Dolphin Discovery. Except for the fact that the film makers used the same background music for every video (James Taylor's "Mexico," which I grew to hate), the footage was fascinating.

At Dolphin Discovery, the humans enter a protected cove and the dolphins swim over to interact. That's the first step. Before long, they are cooperating in the "foot push" (the swimmer extends his or her legs and is propelled back to the dock by two dolphins) and another maneuver whereby the human is towed by grasping the dorsal fins of the dolphin pair.

The first video showed a very frightened Shirley Bliley grabbing at the glossy dolphin backs as if there were life preservers. By the end, she looked at peace and at home.

Atwater said swimming with dolphins is apparently beneficial to people with medical problems and/or disabilities. We may not speak each others' language, she added, but there seems to be a mental connection of some kind.

She told a story about a young boy with Down's Syndrome who established an immediate rapport with some of the Discovery dolphins. When he was unable to extend his legs for the foot push, other dolphins moved over from throughout the cove to lift him with their collective mass and deliver him to his mother waiting by the dock.

"That wasn't the way they had been trained to do it," Atwater said. "They made a conscious decision to break protocol."

"Wait a minute," somebody said. "How did the dolphins know which was his mother?"

Atwater smiled.

"Exactly," she said.